DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 672 UD 035 562

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TITLE Improving the Economic and Life Outcomes of At-Risk Youth.
INSTITUTION Manpower Demonstration Research Corp., New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Palo Alto, CA.
PUB DATE 2002-10-00
NOTE 24p.
AVAILABLE FROM Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 16 East 34th Street, New York, NY 10016-4326. Tel: 212-532-3200; Fax: 212-684-0832; Web site: http://www.mdrc.org.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *At Risk Persons; Enrollment Trends; Graduation; High School Graduates; Labor Market; Program Effectiveness; Secondary Education; *Student Participation; *Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Student Engagement; Youth Development Program

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines ideas and strategies to engage alienated and disaffected young people and help them acquire skills, gain work experience, and improve their lives. Based on lessons learned from three decades of demonstrations and evaluations concerning at-risk youth, the paper presents ideas that government agencies and private foundations could consider when working to fill important service and knowledge gaps. It offers suggestions about how to change the public discourse about young people at risk and how to strengthen the public will to capitalize on this population's strengths and potential. The paper recommends three program strategies, all of which leverage youth-serving institutions and existing funding streams and lay the groundwork to expand programs whose effectiveness has stood the test of evaluation. The fundamental premise of this paper is how to increase youth engagement as a prerequisite to success. It draws upon existing research, the experiences of youth programs that have had unusual success in attracting and retaining enrollees, insights from a youth development perspective, and the observations of youth program practitioners and young people themselves. Recommendations are presented in the areas of goals and framework for action, program design, and broadening public support and building capacity. (SM)

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Improving the Economic and Life Outcomes of At-Risk Youth

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MDRC Produced This Paper with Support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

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Fall 2002

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Introduction

This paper outlines ideas and strategies to engage alienated and disaffected young people and help them acquire skills, gain work experience, and improve their lives. The ambitious goal is to significantly increase the proportion of young people who at age 25 have a high school diploma and a postsecondary degree or credential, are employed in jobs with career mobility opportunities, are involved in stable interpersonal relationships, and are not engaged in risk-taking behaviors. Based on lessons from three decades of demonstrations and evaluations concerning at-risk youth, this paper presents ideas that government agencies and private foundations might want to consider in aiming to fill important service and knowledge gaps. It presents ideas about how to change the public discourse about young people at risk and how to strengthen the public will to capitalize on this population's strengths and potential. The paper recommends three program strategies, all of which leverage youth-serving institutions and existing funding streams and lay the groundwork to expand programs whose effectiveness has stood the test of evaluation.

The underlying premise of the proposed strategies is that the mixed results found in studies of existing youth programs can be explained largely by three factors: underenrollment of key subgroups, inconsistent participation among enrollees, and high rates of attrition. Many of the young people who could most benefit from program services do not enroll at all, and a large proportion of those served do not participate long enough to earn education credentials, improve their work readiness and life management skills, and acquire the technical skills needed to compete effectively in the job market. Therefore, a fundamental premise of this paper is how to increase youth engagement as a prerequisite to success. In crafting recommendations, we draw on existing research, the experiences of youth programs that have had unusual success in attracting and retaining enrollees, insights from a "youth development" perspective, and the observations of youth program practitioners and young people themselves.

Summary of the Recommendations

Goals and Framework for Action

- **Move beyond the modest efforts of the past.** The ambition of this initiative calls for helping strong programs reach and engage a tougher segment of the youth population and for testing new models that combine the best of what has been learned and that address the critical service gaps of past programs.

- **In deciding where to target resources, take account of the heterogeneity of the at-risk 16- to 24-year-old population.** At one end of the continuum are young people who have persevered despite the odds and are working in

jobs with career mobility or are enrolled in postsecondary education. At the other end are youth living on the margins, including young people who are incarcerated and disaffected "street youth" who survive through illicit activities such as gangs, prostitution, and drug trafficking. In between are those who are working but are stuck in low-wage, dead-end jobs; those who are motivated enough to enroll in programs like YouthBuild and Conservation Corps; those who are "hanging out" and are not involved in deviant behavior but are suspicious of programs; and those suffering from depression, abuse, and other mental health problems.

- **Focus discussion and initiatives on at-risk young people in the broad middle range.** Potential strategies could encompass helping young low-wage workers get into postsecondary education as a pathway to better jobs; helping alienated and unmotivated young people enroll in the strongest youth programs; and adding clinical or therapeutic components to address reading and language difficulties, mental health problems, and conflict management issues. We also suggest considering a preventive strategy aimed at 12- to 16-year-old adolescents from at-risk families.

- **Maximize youth engagement and participation.** Youth strategies need to be reformulated to ensure that they resonate with young people, creating both a demand to get into programs and compelling reasons to stay in them long enough to benefit and achieve benchmarks. Recognizing the need for eventual public support of successful approaches, we suggest that the strategy have as its centerpiece the recognition that reciprocal obligation is needed — a recognition like the one that resonated with the public concerning welfare reform. This might entail guaranteeing young people a "package" of opportunities that combine the commitment of skilled and caring adults, education (including computer literacy), work or training, mental health and drug abuse services, and so on — provided that participants remain productively engaged and avoid (or make progress in avoiding) such risk-taking behaviors as substance abuse and unprotected sex.

Design of the Initiative

- **Concentrate resources geographically to maximize impacts.** This would most likely call for starting in a small number of midsize cities or in low-income neighborhoods in large cities — or both.

- **Work with local officials to develop clear, compelling goals.** For example, a city might set as its goal a doubling of the number of out-of-school youth aged 16 to 24 who earn high school diplomas or postsecondary credentials, gain computer literacy skills, and find jobs and a halving of the number of out-of-wedlock teen births and drug-related arrests.

- **Invest in effecting changes in youth policy and in the systems that deliver services.** This could begin with funding commitments from the mainstream government systems that work with at-risk youth, paving the way for changes in youth policy and for the scaling-up of programs that rigorous evaluations have identified as being most effective.

- **Encourage and leverage the expansion of proven programs, provided that they strive to engage harder-to-reach segments of the at-risk youth population.**

- **Develop and test three new demonstration ideas to address unmet needs and service gaps and to increase knowledge about approaches that work.** The demonstration ideas proposed here center on extending outreach, increasing positive youth engagement, building skills, inculcating a sense of belonging, and incorporating the elements that seem to drive the success of the most effective youth programs. These elements include a focus on education, including computer literacy; paid work or training; the involvement of caring and committed adults; special services for youth with language and reading difficulties, mental health, or other special needs; resiliency skills; and leadership development. Demonstration ideas need to focus on building social networks as well as human capital, changing community norms, and giving young people the leadership skills, self-esteem, and resiliency to derive the best from (and resist negative influences in) their peer cultures. The demonstration ideas — which range from preventive strategies for younger at-risk adolescents to the creation of postsecondary opportunities for older youth — are described briefly below:

  Prevention-oriented strategies to promote positive youth development. Programs aimed at this goal would target adolescents aged 12 to 16 in households receiving public assistance and would involve expanding programs like the Quantum Opportunity Program (QOP), the Children's Aid Society (CAS)-Carrera Program, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. QOP and CAS-Carrera are community-based after-school programs that offer young people financial incentives contingent on their participation and progress.

They involve a variety of youth development activities, including academic support, career awareness, financial literacy, sports and cultural activities, community service, and — in the case of CAS-Carrera — family life and sex education. The major funding streams that could be leveraged would be Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in the Department of Health and Human Services and 21st Century Schools in the Department of Education.

Skill-building strategies to help out-of-school youth secure employment. These programs would enhance or create community-based youth centers — especially in highly impoverished neighborhoods — that engage 16- to 21-year-olds in core academic and computer literacy classes that culminate in a high school diploma or a postsecondary certificate. They would also offer paid work experience and experiential training, life and resiliency skills, community mentors, and cultural and recreational activities. Young people with limited English proficiency, mental health and conflict resolution problems, or substance abuse problems would have access to special services. The centers would focus on building skills and self-esteem, increasing job access, and changing community norms and peer cultures. Possible prototypes for the centers include Diploma Plus, the Philadelphia Twilight schools, and the Center for Employment Training (CET). The funding streams that could be leveraged would be TANF (for young parents on welfare), child support (for noncustodial parents), juvenile justice, foster care, and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

Postsecondary strategies to increase career mobility among young workers. These strategies would enable at-risk 18- to 24-year-olds to earn both a General Educational Development (GED) certificate and a community college postsecondary certificate in a high-growth industry that offers career mobility opportunities — such as information technology, allied health, and financial services. The costs of tuition and books would be covered by Pell grants or other student aid programs; students would receive stipends for participating in training or wages for work study in conjunction with training; and support services such as counseling, life management and resiliency skills, and job placement assistance. Students would also have the opportunity to pursue advanced certification or an associate's degree while working — or even a bachelor's degree. Funds for such activities could be leveraged from Carl Perkins, Pell, WIA, and the Higher Education Act.

Evaluations to build a record of effective approaches. Each of these demonstrations should be developed with a plan for research that will yield solid evidence about the effectiveness of the approach tested. Typically, this will involve the use of both random assignment to study program impacts and multiyear follow-up to assess longer-term effects. Gathering evidence on effective programs will support the broader goal of increasing the public will to address the problems of at-risk youth, as discussed below.

Broadening Public Support and Building Capacity

- **Increase the public's interest in the challenges facing at-risk youth and the willingness to devote resources to addressing them.** Bold ideas need public support. A new message regarding at-risk youth, along with new messengers, is needed. The message — conveyed by top civic officials and leaders from private industry, the military, clergy, and popular entertainment — should focus on the assets and potential of youth as positive resources in strengthening communities and improving society. In addition, the message should build on the notion of reciprocal obligation.

- **Identify the most effective adult literacy programs, and build the capacity of youth-serving organizations.** Such efforts could include staff development for youth professionals and supplementing or enhancing efforts that are already supported by the Department of Labor and the National Youth Employment Coalition. A particular focus of capacity-building could be on how to expand access to programs for tougher segments of the at-risk youth population and how to stimulate their sustained, intense engagement in services.

The remainder of this paper amplifies on these key recommendations, first by discussing goals and objectives and reviewing the implications of what is known about the circumstances of young people and the effectiveness of past and present youth programs. Focusing on the need to increase involvement and participation in youth programs, it then outlines a plan of action and connects the proposed initiative to the need to change the public discourse about at-risk youth. The paper concludes with suggested action steps.

Our recommendations are ambitious — even daunting — but they are made with the intention to move boldly beyond the incrementalism of the past. If adopted, the recommendations have the potential to transform youth policy. But like any daring undertaking, this one also entails major risks and the possibility of falling short of goals. If the policy, program, and funding communities proceed in this area, they should do so vigorously, by making a sustained eight- to ten-year commitment; by building a consortium of public and private funding; by engaging other

funding partners, public and private; and by drawing on the intellectual capital and practical wisdom of the country's leading youth experts, who can serve as intermediaries, advocates, advisors, program operators, and evaluators.

Goals and Objectives

The preliminary goal for this initiative is to substantially increase the proportion of at-risk 16- to 24-year-olds who at age 25 have a high school diploma and a postsecondary degree or certificate, are employed in jobs with career mobility opportunities, are involved in stable interpersonal relationships, and are not engaged in risk-taking behaviors.

With this overarching goal in mind, we propose using three types of objectives to guide the design of the initiative. First, by targeting initiatives to a small group of large and midsize cities, community objectives will be key. A community objective might be, for example, to double the number of young people in the target group who obtain employment, earn a high school diploma and a postsecondary credential, and are computer-literate and to halve the number of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and births and drug-related crimes. Setting ambitious goals could mobilize an entire city or community.

Second, it is important that service providers convey a clear, compelling message about what young people can expect to receive from youth programs. Although there are no easy solutions to complex problems, complicated program designs are actually hard to implement, difficult to explain to policymakers, and hard to convey to prospective participants. We suggest that programs highlight the following outreach objectives when marketing their services to young people: opportunities to work, to earn a credential, to become computer-literate, and to access college. These are objectives that will resonate with young people.

Third, objectives related to funding or systemic change center on the desire to improve existing public and private systems that serve at-risk youth. Potential sustainability and expansion should be considered from the beginning. Except in cases where government agencies have been involved, foundation-funded demonstrations have rarely been picked up by the mainstream funding streams, which suggests that it is important to get cooperation and funding commitments from key federal agencies, namely, the Departments of Labor (WIA, including Youth Opportunity and Job Corps), Health and Human Services (TANF, child support, foster care, and child care), and Education (21st Century Schools, Pell and other postsecondary education initiatives, Carl Perkins, adult education, charters, and so on), and the National Institute of Justice. In the current climate of devolution, it is essential to build similar relationships and to secure comparable funding commitments from parallel agencies in the states and localities where the target cities are located.

Knowledge-building can also effect systemic change. Third-party evaluations — conducted in a cost-benefit framework — should be strongly considered, to discover whether the urban-centered network of interventions supports leads to higher rates of attainment of benchmark goals than the target population would achieve on its own. The most reliable way to measure an intervention's effects — or, in the language of evaluations, its "impacts" — involves random assignment, in which the outcomes of the young people served by investments in programs and policies (and the dollars that the investment leverages) are compared with those of a randomly selected control group of young people. MDRC has shown that evidence from random assignment evaluations can have a powerful influence on policymakers and officials in the Department of Health and Human Services in their deliberations about welfare reform, and the Department of Education is now pushing for scientifically based studies of school reforms in the context of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The combination of early buy-in from government agencies and convincing research results could have a lasting impact on the future of youth policy and programs in this country and on the systems that support them. It could also lead to the scaling-up of proven strategies.

Understanding At-Risk Youth

Thinking through solutions requires a thorough understanding of at-risk 16- to 24-year-olds, including their patterns of labor market participation, changing demographic characteristics, experiences in education and training programs, family structures, and peer cultures as well as the factors that help or hinder their positive development and constructive engagement in education, work, and training. Much has been written about the demographics and labor force participation of this population, and this paper will not recapitulate research. The following key trends are, however, worth highlighting.

Labor Market Developments

- Disadvantaged youth without a high school diploma (especially African-American men) did not fare well during the economic boom of the 1990s and have been most vulnerable to layoffs during the recent economic downturn.

- The earnings gap between school dropouts and young people with postsecondary credentials continues to increase owing to labor supply and demand. On the demand side, a growing proportion of jobs require some postsecondary training. On the supply side, the coming-of-age of the most recent baby boomers, the growing number of immigrant youth, and the wave of young drug offenders being released from prison have all swelled the ranks of prospective young workers.

- The education credential most frequently emphasized in youth programs — the GED certificate — gives workers significantly more earning power if it is accompanied by some postsecondary training. Several studies have found that having a GED alone produces only small improvements in earnings.

- At-risk youth not only generally lack skills and credentials but are often not part of social networks that provide the kind of access to jobs that middle-class youth enjoy. Many low-income young people come from families and communities where relatively few adults work in the mainstream economy.

Personal Circumstances of At-Risk Youth

- Marriage among at-risk youth has declined over the past 25 years. Although the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies and births has leveled off, the rates are still high relative to those for the rest of the population.

- A growing proportion of people in this population — especially young mothers and juvenile offenders — have mental health problems.

- Fueled in part by the entertainment industry, peer cultures exert a powerful influence on the lives of young at-risk youth and often clash with societal norms, validating or even promoting antisocial behavior that compromises personal and economic growth.

- The at-risk youth population is diverse and dynamic. A small but significant subgroup is disconnected — that is, not employed or in school or training and not in a stable relationship — for extended periods between ages 16 and 24; this subgroup is rarely reached by government and community-based education and training programs. Other young people at risk experience shorter bouts of disconnectedness and persevere on their own. Youth policies and strategies must be calibrated to accommodate those who are ready to move forward with their lives, to different degrees.

Reflecting on Past Research Lessons

The Evolving Research Record on Youth Programs

The evidence from evaluations of youth demonstrations is open to many competing interpretations. Some youth advocates and practitioners believe that they know what works and that the solution rests in stronger youth policies and increased funding. "Hard-nosed" researchers contend that "nothing works" and that the problems are beyond the government's ability to solve.

Although rigorous random assignment evaluations have provided only limited evidence about effective solutions, we believe that the evolving research findings offer grounds for optimism and further action.

Until recently, the findings from the methodologically strongest evaluations of youth programs were discouraging. A series of evaluations conducted from the 1970s through the mid-1990s of what were seen as some of the more promising youth programs — including Supported Work, JobStart, New Chance, and the Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) — showed little or no long-term effects on a broad range of education and labor market outcomes. Equally discouraging were the findings from the youth study of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), which was once one of the main funding systems for this population.

More recently, however, several studies provide reasons for optimism and suggest some principles of good program design. A study of Job Corps, for example, corroborated the positive findings from an evaluation of the same program conducted 20 years earlier. Evaluations of the Urban Youth and Conservation Corps showed modest but positive impacts, especially for African-American males. The Center for Employment Training (CET) was the only JobStart site that produced significant employment and earnings effects. Studies of QOP and CAS-Carerra showed large favorable impacts across a broad range of outcomes, including a drop in teen pregnancies and births. Further, a study of the mentoring program offered by Big Brothers/Big Sisters found improved school performance and reduced substance abuse. Finally, although YouthBuild has not been evaluated in a random assignment impact study, the program seems to have stimulated strong participation and high completion and job placement rates.

Implications for Youth Program Design

The mixed research results are not cause for paralysis or inaction. On the contrary, the findings can identify program elements that are associated with success and can help us understand the reasons why some programs did not do better.

There are many plausible reasons why some of the best-designed programs failed to produce substantial impacts on youth outcomes. One possible explanation is that participants did not stay in the programs long enough to benefit. Many practitioners and advocates therefore fault youth programs for not being comprehensive and intensive enough. Yet many of the most comprehensive, intensive programs have a hard time enrolling and retaining young people. Another possible explanation is that the programs reached only the more motivated subgroup of the at-risk population, who were likely to make it on their own without a program. This highlights the importance of youth engagement, that is, of coming up with policies and program strategies to reach disconnected young people and to increase their positive, productive engagement.

What are some factors that might contribute to underenrollment and high attrition in youth programs?

Lack of Awareness or Interest

- There appears to be a growing distrust and cynicism among young people about programs and government bureaucracies. Many young people feel that programs do not show them respect.
- Prospective participants may not be aware of programs because of diffuse and ambiguous goals, poor outreach, or ineffective marketing.
- Young people may be deterred from applying and enrolling in programs because of an eligibility certification process that feels intrusive or requires information that the youth do not have about family income and expenses.
- Programs may not see it as within their purview to "sell" themselves to their target population, to demonstrate their relevance, and to sustain enrollees' interest. Some programs assume that youth will come when they are "ready to change," whereas others must meet high outcome standards and therefore prefer to work with the most motivated participants.

Unmet Needs

- Because of restrictions on federal funding streams, many programs do not offer paid work experience, stipends, or other financial incentives. Given the economic realities faced by at-risk youth, it is difficult for human capital development programs to compete with the secondary labor market and the underground economy.
- Some programs offer too narrow a slice of services, leaving young people's needs unmet or requiring them to enroll in multiple programs.
- Some programs' services are not accessible via public transportation or are not offered at convenient hours, especially for prospective enrollees who are already working and need to upgrade their skills.
- Youth program workers, while committed and well intentioned, often do not have the professional training to deal with language and literacy needs, mental health issues, depression, conflict resolution, and other thorny problems.
- Programs may not be responsive to labor market trends or employers' needs.

Obstacles Outside the Program

- Youth must at times "go it alone" in programs because they receive little positive reinforcement from family members or community leaders and they encounter the negative influence or disapproving stance of peers and popular culture.

- Personal and situational factors outside the program can interfere with sustained participation and progress. Examples include breakdowns in housing or child care arrangements, an abusive partner, and so on.

What are some factors that might contribute to the success of youth programs that have high enrollment and high retention levels? Such factors — which can be discovered by examining the elements that the more effective youth programs have in common — could lead to a more comprehensive youth strategy.

A Feeling of Connection

- *The presence of caring, committed adults to provide moral and emotional support.* YouthBuild and CAS-Carrera do this through program staff; Big Brothers/Big Sisters, through mentors; Conservation Corps, through crew supervisors; and QOP, through community-based case managers.

- *The creation of a personal, family-like atmosphere, a sense of camaraderie with peers and staff, and a sense of belonging.*

- *The engagement of young people in sports, cultural pursuits, and other extracurricular activities.* This is a feature of QOP, CAS-Carrera, and YouthBuild.

Meeting Needs

- *Opportunities for paid work and the use of financial incentives.* YouthBuild and Conservation Corps provide paid work experience, while QOP, CAS-Carrera, and Job Corps offer financial incentives. The Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects (YIEPP) demonstration — the centerpiece of President Jimmy Carter's ambitious youth initiative — showed what a magnet the offer of a job guarantee can be: 87 percent of all young people who were eligible for the program (economically disadvantaged 16- to 19-year-olds in 17 cities, including Baltimore, Boston, and Detroit) applied for the program, and some 76,000 of them ended up working. This job creation strategy was so powerful that it virtually eliminated the disparity between the employment rates of Caucasian and African-American youth.

- *Work experience projects that are visible and provide a valued, needed service to the community.* YouthBuild participants renovate vacant residences, thus increasing the supply of affordable housing. Conservation Corps members work on a variety of environmental, community service, and senior citizen projects. These projects enable young people to make a contribution to their community, boosting their sense of self-worth.

- *Experiential, hands-on education and training activities that combine teacher-led and computer-assisted instruction.* Such activities are provided by Job Corps, Focus Hope, and the Center for Employment Training.

- *Support for personal growth through training in resiliency skills and opportunities for leadership development.* YouthBuild's governance structure gives participants opportunities to set and enforce policies, to participate in community organization and political mobilization, and to become ambassadors for the program. CAS-Carrera offers intensive classes in life management skills.

Acknowledging the Life Circumstances of At-Risk Youth

- *Staff members who are accessible at all hours, who are willing to talk over issues outside the program, and who are "there" for young people when and where they have problems.* Programs that make these commitments — even if participants' problems cannot be addressed directly — help engage youth.

Promoting a Youth Participation Bargain

MDRC proposes that the youth-serving community also take a page from the welfare reform playbook by adopting the themes of reciprocal obligation and required participation. Participation bargains can work through incentives, penalties, or a combination of the two. In the welfare context, recipients who fail to meet participation requirements are subject to reductions in their welfare grant; recipients who work, however, can supplement their income through the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and a partial grant supplement based on state income disregard rules, and they also can qualify for such work supports as food stamps, transitional health insurance, and child care subsidies.

Findings on the use of participation bargains in the youth field have been generally encouraging. The most ambitious example was YIEPP, in which economically disadvantaged 16- to 19-year-olds were guaranteed a job (part time during the school year and full time during the summer) on the condition that they stay in or return to school and meet school attendance and performance requirements. While the program did not improve education outcomes, its incentives were effective in attracting and engaging young people.

The Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) program, which began operating in Ohio in the early 1990s, offered a bargain involving both incentives and penalties. Through the program, teen parents on welfare could receive an extra $62 a month in welfare by staying in school and meeting attendance standards; teen parents who dropped out of school or failed to meet the attendance requirement lost $62 a month in welfare. More participants earned the bonus than suffered the penalty, and LEAP had some positive overall effects on school attendance and, for some subgroups, on earnings after high school.

QOP offered a financial incentives bargain. In addition to providing intensive case management, the program offered teenagers whose parents received welfare financial incentives contingent on their participation in after-school activities and meeting key benchmarks. QOP had positive effects on a broad range of outcomes, from school completion and college enrollment to pregnancy prevention.

There are two major reasons to consider creating a participation bargain for at-risk youth. First, as we have seen in welfare policy, the public generally approves of helping low-income people who are working hard to improve their lives. For example, there is much greater support for low-wage workers than for welfare recipients, as reflected in broad public support for the EITC, income supplements for welfare recipients who go to work, and transitional benefits for former welfare recipients. The public is therefore likely to respond favorably to policies that help young people who help themselves and who avoid risk-taking behaviors. Second, the cited examples of financial incentives have successfully addressed the biggest challenge faced by youth programs, namely, maintaining high levels of engagement, participation, and retention.

Here are a few ways in which a participation bargain could be incorporated into youth policy:

- Guarantee financial support to all children in TANF households and all Title I-eligible youth for two years of postsecondary education — through Pell grants, Hope Scholarships, or the Lifelong Learning Tax Credit — provided that they graduate from high school with at least a C+ average or earn a GED and avoid risk-taking behaviors. This strategy could be realized as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

- Use a combination of financial incentives and penalties to induce teens in welfare families to stay in school, participate in after-school activities and community service, and avoid risk-taking behaviors such as drug use. This effort could be modeled on QOP and LEAP and could be realized as part of TANF reauthorization.

- Guarantee jobs (part time during the school year and full time during the summer) to at-risk 18- to 21-year-olds for up to two years, provided that they participate for at least 20 hours a week in education activities leading to a high school diploma, GED, or postsecondary credential and avoid risk-taking behaviors. This initiative could be modeled on YIEPP, with jobs being subsidized for young people who do not find them on their own. The focus would be on jobs that also provide a community service, such as renovating vacant housing, working in senior centers, improving public parks, and providing backup for emergency service workers. Additional efforts could be made to tailor the education programs to help interested young people meet the entry requirements for postsecondary education or the military. This strategy could be built into WIA reauthorization.

Approaches to Increasing Participation

With increased participation being an anchor of the initiative, program design and implementation should be focused on this priority. The following are some insights that build on the best of what has been learned and that address the shortcomings of past efforts. We begin with ideas related to the initial stage of program operations: recruiting youth by selling the benefits of participation and lowering the financial, time, and psychological costs of participating.

- **New ways should be developed to motivate youth to enroll in programs, get involved, and commit to changing their lives.** The programs need to be viewed as valuable by young people and to compete successfully with alternatives in the community, such as jobs in the secondary labor market, the underground economy, drugs and gangs, or idleness. Focus groups may reveal more about what galvanizes young people, but past studies indicate that they respond to opportunities to belong to a community, build their skills, hold paid jobs, receive paid hands-on training in high-growth occupations, have contact with caring adults, and express themselves through the arts and sports. Most young people recognize the value of a high school diploma or GED, but many have had negative experiences in school and second-chance programs. Thus, education per se may not be a big draw, but the opportunity to learn how to use computers could be enticing. Similarly, the prospect of learning life management and resiliency skills may not have much allure, but the opportunity to open bank accounts and learn about money management could attract enrollees. Therefore, to recruit young people, the programs may want to highlight components related to jobs, training, computer and financial literacy, the arts, and recreation. Later — as enrollees come to trust the program and to recog-

nize the need for an education credential and the value of resiliency and conflict resolution skills — the program could begin engaging them in activities related to these other areas.

- **Reaching disconnected youth — who typically do not enroll in education and training programs — should be a priority and will require new forms of outreach and new approaches in at least two areas.** First, recruiting this group may call for a different way of conveying the goals of program participation. Young people who are outside the mainstream may not be motivated solely by pragmatic goals like attaining an education credential, learning new skills related to employment, or even getting a job. In addition, programs may have to identify and acknowledge deeper transformational goals that these young people have (for instance, becoming someone who "matters" or combating social injustice) and to devise ways to acknowledge these goals. YouthBuild, for example, helps young people develop their sense of self-worth through community service, and the program acknowledges the effects of racism and class divisions while offering its participants opportunities for leadership. Acknowledging deeper concerns and goals may help participants persist in program activities. Second, if programs want to move beyond serving young people who are willing and able at the outset to comply with behavior requirements regarding drug use, language, conflicts, and so on, they may find that setting "zero tolerance" rules excludes or deters prospective participants whom they would wish to serve. Programs may have to find new ways to set clear expectations regarding behavior while setting benchmarks for enrollees who are not initially able to meet the expectations. Program operators report that striking the right balance on this issue is one of the most difficult aspects of working with at-risk youth; providing guidance in this area will be an important part of program design.

- **Institutional sponsorship may also matter.** Most young people — and especially those who are alienated from service networks — are leery about schools and government agencies. They may respond more positively to community-based organizations and community colleges.

- **Creating opportunities to belong and feel valued is important.** This involves designing program environments that provide structure and limits while also facilitating personal growth and responsibility, self-expression, and mutual respect. Many program operators report that young people respond very favorably when they realize that staff are "there for them" when they are in need, whether because of a family crisis, trouble with the law, or other difficul-

ties. This level of commitment by staff can elicit a similar level of commitment to the program on the part of participants.

- **Hours and location are important considerations.** Most at-risk youth rely on public transportation, so the programs need to be in accessible locations. Providing van service from major residential areas is another option. Hours are also important. Providing services in the afternoon and evenings, for example, may minimize job-scheduling conflicts. Afternoon and evening programming can also serve to keep young people from getting in trouble, as has been shown in research conducted by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, an anticrime organization.

- **Financial incentives are a key form of positive reinforcement that can help sustain program participation.** Financial incentives can be tied to such benchmarks as becoming drug- or alcohol-free; earning academic credentials; completing training, life skill classes, or community service; and acquiring specific competencies.

The following ideas related to program services and administrative practices also seem to help sustain participation.

- The income safety net can supplement earnings from low-wage jobs and improve job retention. Many young low-wage workers do qualify for such public supports as food stamps, the EITC, health insurance, child care subsidies, and so on. Helping young people access and receive these services is important.

- Employers and trade associations can expose young people to a broad range of career opportunities, can better align their training with the labor market, and can increase young people's access to jobs.

- Many young people have special needs, such as limited English proficiency, mental health problems, and difficulties with conflict resolution. Addressing these needs will require having clinical staff on-site or providing access to professional staff off-site.

- Progress needs to be reinforced by family, peers, and the community. This is a major challenge, because community norms may not value the skills and behaviors that young people are trying to adopt, and many at-risk youth come from fragile families. This suggests the importance of developing place-based strategies that focus on high-need communities within the targeted cities so that a critical mass of young people are productively engaged and have the opportunity to develop positive social values and norms. It also highlights the

importance of affording young people contact with caring adults who provide guidance and moral support, reinforce progress, and help them recognize opportunities in the job market and beyond.

- Sustaining engagement and minimizing periods of nonparticipation are also important. Efforts aimed at this goal include rapidly placing young people who are aging-out of foster care or being released from prison in youth programs and facilitating transfers from programs to jobs, postsecondary education, the military, or other programs. This process is particularly important when programs draw on different agencies for services and youth must shift locations — and come into contact with new staff — as they move through a sequence of services. Experience suggests that, in the absence of special efforts to smooth such transitions, many young people do not make them successfully, and they stop participating.

Combining these elements should open up productive pathways that are more attractive than the status quo, rewarding young people for their efforts and progress, creating opportunities to belong, fostering positive social values and norms, and providing ongoing reinforcement and encouragement through caring adults. These interdependent factors must work in harmony if young people are to succeed.

Promoting an Urban Strategy

As already suggested, in order to have a profound effect on at-risk 16- to 24-year-olds, we recommend concentrating efforts on a small group of large and/or midsize cities. In large cities, the focus would be on high-poverty neighborhoods; in midsize cities, the focus would be on the entire city. MDRC recognizes that the choice is difficult between breadth and depth — that is, whether to spread resources over a broad set of approaches, locations, and programs or to devote them to a few locations and a few strategies. We advocate depth over breadth based on evidence suggesting that "more of the same" will not be effective and that a substantial break with past practices is needed. Therefore, we believe that the chances of meeting the initiative's ambitious goals can be maximized by concentrating resources in a limited number of locations. In addition, involving major funding streams from the onset and investing in knowledge-building could lay the groundwork for policy changes and increased funding that might support large-scale expansion and scaling-up in the future.

We recommend that the initiative include both midsize and large cities in order to hedge its bets. The nation's largest cities have the greatest needs and the most diverse population, but their capacity — relative to their need — is more limited, putting them at greater risk of falling short of

goals. Midsize cities with records of progress in other policy areas are fertile grounds for this effort because their problems are not as daunting and their chance of achieving the goals is higher.

As noted earlier, getting individual mayors behind these efforts is important, as is securing the active involvement of the National League of Cities and the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Site Activities and Demonstrations

Assuming an urban focus for the initiative, the groundwork needs to be laid for building a comprehensive youth strategy and network. Once sites are selected, it would be useful to conduct an inventory and needs assessment of the size and demographic characteristics of the target population, the proportion who are working or otherwise productively engaged, and the proportion who are unemployed and disconnected. The analysis should also include labor market trends — especially for jobs that pay between $25,000 and $50,000 a year — and the credentials these jobs require; the various youth funding streams, the current delivery structure, and the capacity of youth-serving organizations; and key service gaps. This assessment could also identify populations with special needs, trends in the growth of the population of immigrant youth who have limited English-language skills, and the number of young people who are aging-out of foster care and being released from prison. In each city, staff and intermediaries, in collaboration with the mayor and a leadership team (which could be the WIA Youth Council), would develop a plan for substantially increasing the number of 16- to 24-year-olds who are working or productively engaged in programs that incorporate core principles.

Part of this analysis would include geographic mapping to identify neighborhoods or other communities where a more intensive deployment of services may be warranted. These might be neighborhoods with the highest concentration of unemployed youth, the highest crime and dropout rates, or the highest concentration of public housing and welfare families.

Building a comprehensive youth strategy in these cities should strike a balance between scaling up proven and promising programs already within these cities and building new models that address unmet needs and fill critical service gaps. Thus, a starting point would be to determine the local presence of Conservation Corps, YouthBuild, CET, Job Corps, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, QOP, CAS-Carrera, and Youth Opportunities and these programs' capacity to recruit and serve young people who are more disconnected than those typically served. Efforts should be made to finance the programs' expansion through the mainstream systems, while other resources could be used to invest in enhancements or variations of these models. For example, foundations could help YouthBuild explore occupational areas other than construction and could help Conservation Corps strengthen its education component and its services connecting participants to jobs or further training. Additional resources could also help interested young people meet the entry requirements for postsecondary education or the military and could provide programs with

special funding to hire staff clinically trained to serve tougher youth subgroups, such as those with a history of substance abuse or depression.

Funding should also be used to develop and test the effectiveness of three new program models and strategies that address the diverse needs of different age groups in the at-risk youth population and that incorporate the underlying principles previously discussed. The focus would be on the broad middle range of at-risk youth; that is, it would exclude both those who are making it on their own and those who are involved in serious criminal activities.

The first model would center on prevention-oriented strategies for younger adolescents (aged 12 to 16) in families who receive public assistance. Younger adolescents have low participation rates in after-school programs and are vulnerable to risk-taking behaviors, especially during unsupervised after-school hours. New research findings also show that the school performance of adolescents in welfare families is adversely affected by their parents' participation in welfare and employment programs and suggests that this may be partly due to their assuming additional responsibilities caring for younger siblings. The sociodemographic and education characteristics of this population suggest that — in the absence of effective interventions — its members will soon enter the later adolescent/young adult target group. We urge consideration of supporting preventive strategies for this group, in addition to ameliorative strategies for older youth.

QOP, CAS-Carrera, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters afford the strongest evidence to date on effective interventions for at-risk adolescents. These programs supply case management and mentoring through caring adults, and they encourage positive engagement in after-school activities such as sports and cultural pursuits, tutoring and academic support, and community service. Efforts should also be made to ensure that the siblings of program enrollees have good, reliable child care. QOP and CAS-Carrera offer financial incentives tied to successful participation and attainment of benchmarks (such as staying in school and being promoted from one grade level to the next), and CAS-Carrera offers family-life and sex education and workshops in career awareness and family literacy. Both QOP and CAS-Carrera reduced teen pregnancies and births; QOP and Big Brothers/Big Sisters had a positive effect on a broad range of education outcomes; and Big Brothers/Big Sisters lowered the incidence of smoking, substance abuse, and other risk-taking behaviors. Some funding could be used to support the scaling-up of these models or to develop variations on their approaches. Funds may be leveraged from TANF and 21st Century Schools.

Second, the youth-serving community could help 16- to 21-year-olds build the work-related skills that they need to find jobs, by creating a network of community-based youth centers. These centers could provide core academic and computer-literacy skills in conjunction with paid work or training, life and resiliency skills, mentors, and cultural and recreational activities. Young people would be able to build skills through education and paid work and training in a supportive, family-like atmosphere that fosters a sense of belonging and promotes positive social values and

norms. They could benefit from relationships with caring, committed adults, such as program staff and mentors who provide guidance and moral support. The combination of structure, support, and skill-building would increase young people's self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of personal responsibility. Those with mental health and conflict resolution issues would have the opportunity to benefit from clinical help in a nonstigmatized way. Some preliminary work would need to be done to investigate literacy programs that have high participation and achievement rates for out-of-school youth. YouthBuild, Conservation Corps, Diploma Plus, and the Twilight Schools in Philadelphia are possible prototypes. Creating new charter schools is another possibility. Further funds could be leveraged from TANF (for young parents on welfare), HUD, child support (for noncustodial parents), juvenile justice, foster care, Education (for charters) and WIA.

A third model should be developed that creates opportunities for 18- to 24-year-olds to earn postsecondary credentials as a pathway to better jobs with career mobility. The focus would be on certificate-granting training programs in high-growth occupational sectors — such as information technology, allied health, and financial services — with jobs paying between $25,000 and $50,000 a year. Community colleges are the logical institutional setting for this model and may provide the type of stature and engagement that adult education programs typically lack. They also provide an opportunity for young people to further their education by transferring to four-year colleges or universities after earning an associate's degree. MDRC's Opening Doors to Earning Credentials project suggests that community colleges will need to enhance their mainstream degree and certificate programs to be successful in enrolling and retaining this population. For example, to help students meet the entry requirements for occupational training, colleges will need to improve the connections between their developmental (remedial and GED) and credit-granting programs. Students are likely to need more extensive support services than are typically available on college campuses, including academic and tutorial support, financial aid counseling, personal counseling, peer support, job placement assistance, and access to specialized services for students with special needs. There may be advantages to enrolling cohorts of students and having them take a class together in life management skills, to build a supportive peer group. In addition to Pell grants and student loans, new forms of financial aid should be considered for working students that would provide stipends to compensate for wages lost as a result of school attendance. Nonworking students would have access to work-study positions, the earnings from which would be disregarded for purposes of qualifying for Pell grants and other forms of student aid. LaGuardia Middle College is one prototype; others include the Fast Track Program at Cabrillo Community College in Santa Cruz, West Tech in Chicago, Access to Better Jobs at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, the Essential Skills Program at Community College of Denver, and Portland (Oregon) Community College's Prep Alternative Programs.

Some community-based alternatives to postsecondary training involve outstationing community college instructors or employer-based instructors at community organizations. The Information Technology Pathways program at Glide Church in San Francisco is one example;

another is Focus Hope in Detroit. Finally, there are employer-based training programs, like the Cisco Academy, that prepare students for jobs as network troubleshooters and administrators through the A-Plus certification program. Funds to support this intervention strategy could be leveraged through Carl Perkins, Pell, WIA, and the Higher Education Act.

Changing the Public Will

Federal funding for at-risk youth has been substantially reduced over the past two decades, and youth policy has focused increasingly on enforcement and punishment (including tougher crime laws, more prisons, and schooling requirements for children in welfare families) at the expense of including human capital development.

Traditionally, the youth cause has been advanced by a small group of deeply committed advocates and practitioners, but their influence and impact have been limited. Past arguments for public investment in young people at risk — such as moral imperatives, guilt, and "pay now, or pay later" — have not changed public opinion or swayed policymakers. Moreover, at-risk youth are not viewed as a voting constituency, which further marginalizes them. A new message and new messengers are needed. Two arguments for youth investment that may be more compelling than those used in the past are the need for a productive, educated workforce and the benefits of young people's civic engagement. The former offers a business rationale for investing in young people, while the latter highlights young people's potential to strengthen communities (for example, through their work as YouthBuild participants and Conservation Corps members). The USA Freedom Corps, proposed by President Bush in the aftermath of September 11th, may be another civic engagement strategy on which to build. These two arguments for youth investment might be bolstered by the theme of reciprocal obligation between youth and programs, as outlined above.

New messengers with the stature to influence public opinion, change policy, and increase funding for at-risk youth could catalyze the expansion of proven and promising programs like Job Corps, YouthBuild, and Conservation Corps as well as spark local interest in testing new ideas. A high-level bipartisan coalition of respected business leaders, clergy, military leaders, entertainers, athletes, and current or former elected officials should be assembled to champion the cause. Given the concentration of out-of-school, out-of-work youth in major cities, mayors also need to be mobilized. This means having the coalition join forces with the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the National League of Cities.

Coupling investment in new services with rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness could also support the effort to change the public will, demonstrating that innovative funders of services for youth are putting new approaches to the test with the goal of identifying successful approaches for broader replication.

Conclusion

The changes outlined in this paper are neither simple nor do they guarantee success. They grow out of a realization that many past youth programs have not engaged young people for long enough to make a real difference in their attitudes and skills. These suggestions are a focused set of hypotheses about promising directions to follow in designing future youth initiatives drawing on both the successes and the disappointments of past efforts. With the stakes so high and support for the status quo so low, these ideas can point to promising directions as we move forward.

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